DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 160 194 PS 010 100

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TITLE Assessing Needs of Families with Young Children.
PUB DATE Aug 77
NOTE 15p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Welfare; Community Cooperation; *Community Services; *Community Surveys; Day Care Services; *Guides; Health Services; *Human Services; Information Utilization; *Needs Assessment; Social Services

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the rationale for needs assessments, briefly describes different types of needs assessments, and outlines basic procedures which can be used in planning and implementing a community needs survey for services for young children and their families. The demographic and statistical approach to needs assessment is briefly contrasted with a program participation, or consumer, model (in which reactions of users and potential users of the service are sought). Six pre-survey, 4 interviewing, and 7 post-survey assessment tasks are identified and discussed briefly. Results of three 1974 and 1975 Minnesota community child development needs assessments are used to illustrate typical dimensions of findings of a comprehensive local needs survey. In principle, the identification of needs should lead to the development of the needed services. A short reference list on child development needs assessment for local communities is provided. (Author/RH)

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ED160194

ASSESSING NEEDS

of

FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

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August 1977

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ASSESSING NEEDS OF FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

Many of us are profoundly aware of the needs of young children and their families for a wide range of child development and family services which will be supportive to families as they seek to foster the growth and development of their children. In the current confusion of a vast array of human services we find ourselves increasingly asked to document these needs. There is keen competition for scarce money for human services. Child development services, including preventive health services, child care services, and early childhood and parent education, are relative newcomers in the human services field and are in many cases still seen as "extras" or "add ons" to social service or educational programs. The needs assessment process can be used to raise the level of public, and public official, awareness of the needs of young children and their families. In fact, needs assessment is more and more often required for the setting of priorities and the allocation of funds. The Headstart Program requires "community needs assessment" and state plans for Title XX of the Social Security Act require needs assessments for the client groups.

The future of new legislation specifically focusing on children and families, such as the Child and Family Services Act of 1975, is uncertain at this time. However, approaches to public policy and children are becoming more sophisticated as evidenced by recent publications such as The Children's Cause (Steiner, 1976) and Toward a National Policy for Children and Families (National Research Council, 1976). If used properly the needs assessment process could facilitate local flexibility and diversity in the provision of any new programs for children and families.

TYPES OF NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

What exactly is meant by needs assessment? There are several types of needs assessments or several ways in which needs assessments can be carried out. Requirements for a needs assessment may vary; a specific procedure may be requested or one or more of a number of approaches may be possible.

Although there are many ways to categorize needs assessments, two basic types can be identified (Warheit et al, 1974; Weiss, 1975). One type of needs assessment involves the analysis of demographic and statistical data. Often this involves using census or other statistical information about the number of families or children eligible for a particular type of service compared to the number of families or children currently receiving that service. This comparison between the number of individuals eligible for a given service and the number of individuals receiving the service will indicate, in most cases, a service gap. For example: In the state of Minnesota, according to the 1970 Census, 82,452 women with children under the age of six were in the labor force. Yet licensed child care facilities were available for only about 18,000 children. Thus for the state as a whole, formal child care services were available for only about 20% of the target population for child care services.

The particular variables selected for analysis are often referred to as "social indicators", (Brim, 1975). These are variables which have previously been found to be highly correlated with persons in need. Such indicators are most useful when the same data is available at different points in time, in order to describe changes in social conditions that may indicate need. Some commonly used indicators for child development services are given in Figure 1.

Figure 1

SOCIAL INDICATORS FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

Variable	Indicates
Number of children under age 6	Indicates potential population for services
Percent of families with children under 6, income below poverty level	Indicates greatest economic need for subsidized services
Percent of employed mothers with children under 6	Suggests need for day care services
Infant and maternal mortality rates	Indicates need for prenatal and postnatal services
Percent of low-weight births	Suggests need for health and nutrition services

The other approach to needs assessment which contrasts, or combines, with the demographic or statistical approach is based on a consumer model involving the users and potential users of the services. Often current participants in a particular program may be asked for their reaction to the program and for suggestions for changes. Less frequently non-users or "drop-outs" are asked for their reactions. Sometimes providers of services or other key informants are interviewed for their perception of user's needs or community residents are provided with a forum for expressing their needs and concerns.

The method usually considered most desirable for a community needs assessment is a needs survey (Warheit et al, 1974). In a needs survey for child development services a random sample of parents of young children are asked what services they use, what their needs are and how they could be best met. By going directly to the users and potential users of services for a determination of needs, more flexibility in defining family and community needs is allowed. Also there is opportunity for innovation and change in service development rather than only reflecting discrepancies between current users and potential eligibles for exist-

ing services. Of course in this approach the design of the survey, including the sampling procedures and the survey form itself, are crucial. A carefully designed and conducted survey can give an accurate reflection of the needs of children and their families in a given locality.

Regardless of which general approach to needs assessment is used or if a combination of approaches are used, the scope of the needs assessment may vary. Some needs assessments focus on one particular concern such as day care or services for handicapped children. Other needs assessments are comprehensive in scope. The basic steps in a comprehensive needs survey will be outlined and some examples given from child development needs surveys which have been conducted in Minnesota.

NEEDS SURVEY PROCEDURES

The procedures which have been used in several local needs assessments are given in Figure 2.*

Figure 2

COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

Pre - Survey	Interviewing	Post - Survey
1. Establish Local Committee on Needs Assessment	1. Recruit Interviewers	1. Code Responses
2. Designate Survey Coordinator	2. Train Interviewers	2. Data Analysis
3. Compile Local Resource	3. Pretest	3. Draft Report
4. Compile Statistical Data about Area	4. Conduct Interviews	4. Committee Review and Recommendations
5. Develop, Select, or Revise Survey Instrument		5. Final Report
6. Sample Selection		6. Release Report
		7. Continued Planning For Implementation

*Further description for the individual items in Figure 2 is given in the Appendix.

At least four aspects of the suggested survey procedures deserve special comment. One, it is strongly recommended that the survey be of a comprehensive nature. The needs of a child and of a family cannot be neatly divided into health needs, welfare needs and education needs. The needs for child care are often related to the needs for immunizations, and good nutrition. The child is a whole child and the child and family are a unit. To get an accurate reflection of the needs of the family and child the needs survey should be comprehensive in scope, thus allowing for the interrelationships of needs and the coordination of services.

Second, in order to carry out a comprehensive survey, cooperation of local agencies, programs and individuals concerned about the young child and family is essential. A local committee which reflects a wide range of interests and programs is helpful for planning, conducting, evaluating and implementing a needs survey.

Third, interviewing is the preferred method of gathering needs survey data. The reasons for this are not only statistical, such as better representativeness than a telephone survey and better participation than a mail survey, but also the personal contact of a trained interviewer can be reassuring and can allow the family to express true concerns and needs. Anonymity is, of course, essential. The family must be assured that their responses will be combined with others' responses, without personal identification.

Lastly, the design of the survey form itself is perhaps the single most important aspect of the survey process. The survey form should allow a full range of responses regarding the needs of young children and their family. All areas that are considered part of comprehensive child development services should be included. The survey form can be organized around topical areas such as maternal health, child health, special problems, parent and early childhood education and child

care. In most cases there should be an underlying reason why a particular question is included. For example, concern about high risk births and follow-up programs for high risk births leads to the inclusion of questions about maternal health, prenatal care, prenatal education classes, infant care and follow-up visits. Similarly, awareness of options for providing early education programs either in the home or in a center leads to asking for parent preferences regarding the location of such services. In all cases, the phrasing of the questions should not favor a particular response and opportunity should be given for the spontaneous comments of the respondent.

WHAT IS FOUND IN A LOCAL NEEDS SURVEY?

Findings in a local needs survey depend on the characteristics of the community. During 1974 and 1975 three local child development needs assessments were conducted in different areas of Minnesota. The areas included a suburban metropolitan county, a three county area in south central Minnesota, and a five county area in north central Minnesota. In all these counties, between 25% to 50% of the population lives in towns and cities, the rest of the population lives in rural areas, sometimes on farms. In general, the urban areas of the counties are towns with populations ranging from 5,000 to 12,000. In most ways the counties surveyed are typical of the parts of the state outside the major metropolitan centers.

Characteristics of Families Samples

The sample of families to be interviewed was randomly selected at the county level in proportion to the number of children under six in each of the townships within each county. A total of 728 families were interviewed. These were all families with at least one child under the age of six. The median in-

come was about $10,000. They were for the most part intact families with employed fathers and, in about one-third of the cases, a working mother as well. The families were relatively young with the median age for the mother of 30 years and a median age for the father of 32 years.

The families were fairly well educated, with over 80% of the mothers and fathers having completed high school. The average total number of children in the families was between 2 and 3; about half of the families had only 1 child under age 6 and half had 2 or 3.

Summary of Survey Findings

The use of a comprehensive needs survey gives a broad view of the needs of children and families. In all three of the local surveys, a number of different topics were covered, reflecting the range of health, educational and social services which families with young children need.

In the surveys conducted, the health needs of the children were particularly obvious. Although the vast majority of parents indicated that their child was receiving health care on a regular basis, in fact about a third of the children had not had a complete physical exam within the previous year. Close to 10% of the children under 6 had never had a complete physical exam. A third of the children ages 4 to 6 had not received vision, hearing or dental screenings. Very few children under those ages were being screened. The majority of the children were receiving some immunizations. However, the percentage of children under 6 who were fully immunized for DPT or Polio was often less than 50%.

The source of information on child development and child rearing mentioned most often by the parents (66%) was medical personnel. When asked about preferences for information about child development and child rearing nearly half of the

respondents indicated preferences for classes or discussion groups with smaller percentages preferring booklets or pamphlets, or television programs for parents.

The parents were also asked about preferences for programs for their pre-school child. Slightly over half indicated their preference for a program for the child at a center for part of the day. About 20% indicated a preference for a parent center where they could learn how to help their child. Smaller percentages indicated preferences for home-based types of programs. These preferences did not vary much depending on the rural or urban residence of the family or the age of the child.

Child care was also one of the major topics covered in the surveys. Substantial proportions of families with children under six do make arrangements for child care when the mother is out of the home. The type of arrangement used, and whether substitute care is arranged in the child's home or out of it varies from area to area. Care in the child's own home is the predominant pattern in the counties surveyed in north central Minnesota while child care arrangements out of the home were more frequent in the south central and suburban counties. In all areas, a larger percentage of families where the mother is presently working prefer care in the formal child care system than are presently using those arrangements. At least a third of the working mothers who are presently using child care arrangements such as a babysitter or neighbor indicated they would prefer care in a family day care home or a day care center. Increasing the range of child care alternatives available in the communities would allow actual patterns of use of child care to more closely match parental preferences for types of child care.

The needs that emerged in these particular areas surveyed are not seen as unique to these areas. The sample, taken as a whole, can be described as "typically middle class", yet the unmet needs exist. The lack or plaucity of child development services in these particular areas in no way distinguishes them from

other areas in the state or country about which similar detailed information is not available. In fact, these communities which have already begun a systematic needs assessment are probably ahead in the long process of improving services for children and families.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF DOING A NEEDS SURVEY?

The process of organizing and conducting a child development needs assessment contributes to increased communication, cooperation and awareness of the needs of young children and their families at the community level. Once the needs assessment survey is complete the community can begin to match identified needs with available resources. Some needs can be met by improved information and referral to community services, others by the coordination of existing services, and still others may be met by the expansion of current programs or the development of new programs. Alternative strategies for meeting needs identified by the survey can be defined and recommendations made to local officials. The information gained can be used as the basis for funding requests. Thus the identification of the needs should lead to the development of the needed services.

WHERE DO I GO FOR MORE HELP?

The concept of a needs assessment is not new. However, increasing pressure to document needs in a systematic way is coming from a variety of sources. The request for needs assessment data is not usually coupled with funds or the technical assistance to carry out an adequate survey. References on child development needs assessment procedures for local communities are few. The Early Childhood Project of The Educational Commision of the States (ECS, 1976) has a published needs assessment handbook that is geared to state-level efforts; it can be helpful at the local level also. A manual for community needs assessment for child development services has been developed (CDPP, 1975) in at least one state.

The possibilities for involving individuals with technical knowledge in conducting surveys becomes greater when local child advocates are themselves more knowledgeable about the needs assessment process.

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APPENDIX

Description for Figure 2

Pre-Survey

1. Establish Local Needs Assessment Committee -

   A committee composed of representatives of various agencies and programs concerned with young children and parents representatives.

2. Designate Survey Coordinator -

   Coordinates the survey process. Should be familiar with the area and able to establish positive contacts with the individuals involved. Helps to be familiar with technical survey procedures.

3. Compile Local Resource Inventory - A listing of current providers of services related to children and families.

4. Statistical Data Base - Compilation of available statistical information from sources such as census, health statistics about number and characteristics of children and families in the area.

5. Survey Form - The survey form should reflect local concerns. Use of a standard form can allow comparison to other communities, counties and areas. Should include component areas of health, education and child care.

6. Sampling - Valid sampling procedures must be followed in order to select a sample that is representative of the population of families with a child under the age of six in the geographic area involved.

Interviewing

1. Recruit Interviewers -

   Volunteer interviewers can usually be recruited through local

organizations. Interviewers should be reimbursed for their expenses.

2. Training for Interviewers -

   A training session must be held for interviewers in order to familiarize them with the standardized procedures to be followed.

3. Pretesting - Allows for modifications in the procedures or survey form.

4. Conducting Interviews -

   Exact wording of the questions should be used and also the same clarifying information is such is requested. The interviewers remain in contact with the survey coordinator during the entire interviewing stage.

Post - Survey

1. Coding Responses - A technical process using uniform procedures and numerical codes.
2. Data Analysis - Access to computor processing greatly facilitates this process.
3. Draft Report - Result of the survey should be put into tables with written explanation as soon as possible.
4. Committee Review - The committee reviews the draft report and offers suggestions and develops recommendations for meeting the identified needs.
5. Final Report - The draft report is put in final form for public release.
6. Release Report - The report should be presented to the public either in a public meeting or through the media.
7. Continued Planning - The committee should monitor progress on the implementation of the recommendations or further use of the survey data.